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ABSTRACT

A study investigated how a teacher managed her whole-language instructional approach within the constraints of the district skills-based evaluation program. Data gathering and analysis took place over a 5-month period in a first-grade urban midwestern classroom. Data included field notes, interviews, artifacts, and classroom observations. The teacher expressed the conflict she had with the demand for traditional evaluation measures and what she thought was useful to her as a teacher. She devised a combination of techniques to meet these demands: she integrated some traditional quantitative assessment and used periodic checks from standardized measures provided by basal reader publishers. A great deal of evaluation information was gathered by the teacher informally through daily and weekly observations describing children's literacy behaviors. As the year progressed, the teacher kept careful records on student writing and the children's growing knowledge of letter/sound relations. Assigning writing grades produced a continual dilemma for the teacher. As a necessary compromise, the teacher produced the kind of evaluation her district demanded and also managed her needs as a whole language teacher. At the heart of her evaluation, the teacher constructs meaning for herself and her students in ways that are child-centered and consistent with theoretical groundings. (Completed samples of a parent questionnaire, a reading questionnaire, a child's actual oral reading behavior, and a letter identification score sheet are attached.) (RS)

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A first-grade whole-language teacher in a traditional urban school: Managing evaluation and supporting children's learning

Running Head: Managing evaluation and supporting children's learning

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A first-grade whole language teacher in a traditional urban school: Managing evaluation and supporting children's learning

As the only first-grade whole language teacher in a U. S. mid-western urban school district Ellen found that evaluation was the major issue in convincing the school principal and district superintendent to allow her to practice whole language teaching. Ellen chose to implement her whole language instruction by requesting permission of her principal and central office administrators. In this process Ellen found that the major question about her whole language instruction was how she would manage evaluation and how whole language instruction would affect test scores. The children in Ellen's school were from low income homes and the school district has a historically strong reliance on standardized testing and skills-based curriculum. Parents, administrators, and most fellow teachers in this urban, working-class setting viewed statistics from traditional test measures as documentation of successful literacy learning. Like many professional and lay persons they viewed the nature of teaching as a predictable and stable task of imparting knowledge and testing learning. The purpose of this discussion is two fold. First, it provides an overview of the teacher managing her instruction within the constraints of the district skills-based evaluation program. Secondly, the paper describes actual teacher behaviors as Ellen evaluates and supports children's written language learning. This paper focuses on a first-grade teacher's ways of coping with a

traditional system of evaluation and how this evaluation was part of whole language instruction. Information gathered in this classroom indicated that the district evaluation system is in conflict with the way teachers actually think and act. This study involved a whole language teacher and is grounded in transaction theory of language learning (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1989). Research in whole language classrooms (Goodman, Goodman, & Hood, 1989; Harp, 1990) indicates that evaluation is best understood through study of the teacher's interactions with children learning to read and write Thus, the teacher's actual thoughts and actions were of interest in this study. Results indicate that the teacher managed evaluation through a complex interplay of observing and reflecting on children's literacy learning and her own teaching.

The current investigation followed children through their first-grade year of instruction. Data gathering and analysis took place over a five month period. To begin the study, Ellen was identified as a whole language teacher through a variety of techniques including the Theoretical Orientations to Reading Profile (TORP) (DeFord, 1979), structured interviews, and classroom observations (Freppon, 1991). Throughout the autumn of the school year, the researcher met with and informally interviewed the teacher each week. In addition, twice weekly classroom observations of the teacher's interactions with the first-grade children were conducted. Audio and video tapes, artifacts, and elaborated field notes provided descriptions of classroom interactions with a focus on how Ellen managed her whole language

program and some of the evaluation techniques she used to balance her work.

Ellen's theoretical perspectives as a whole language teacher was in conflict with school district evaluation demands. For example, she had to keep percentage grades on various subjects in her gradebook and produce quarterly report cards with letter grades. Thus, evaluation required that Ellen integrate what she found to be theoretically and personally acceptable as a whole language teacher with specifics required by the school system.

School and instructional factors interact to shape evaluation

The major issue in gaining permission to implement whole language teaching in Ellen's first grade was "covering evaluation" and ensuring that standardized test scores would not suffer. Ellen explains, "My district is very conservative. I consider it curriculum-centered rather than child-centered. Everything (teachers are required to do) is tuned to test results... standardized evaluation measures are everything. In my first year of my pilot program and in the next year all the principal said to me was 'I thought your kids would test gifted in reading'. That comment told me that she saw my program as a catch all to raise test scores."

Throughout the interviews and in comments made by the teacher during classroom observations Ellen expressed the conflict she had with demand for traditional evaluation measures and what she thought was useful to her as a teacher. For example, she noted that the children's actual work samples, kept in portfolios, helped her monitor progress and shape her instruction in accord with learner's responses. However, the demand to translate actual

reading and writing behaviors into numerical values was a continuing problem. Ellen devised a combination of techniques to meet the demands of quantitative data on the children's progress. The following discussion provides descriptions of some of the ways Ellen managed.

Balancing district evaluation demands and whole language teaching

Ellen began the school year with parent questionnaires that provided information about the children's background in reading (see Appendix A). She also used reading interviews with each child (see Appendix B) at the beginning and end of the year. These documents, along with Ellen's classroom observations, provided personal and affective information about children's experiences with and responses to written language.

Ellen also carried out mid-year and end-of-year Running Record (Clay, 1979) analysis of children's actual oral reading behaviors and made notes on the strategies children used (see Appendix C). For example, she noted that a child used rereadings and that the learner's hesitations and intonation indicated reading for meaning. Additional Running Record analysis was done with children who had problems in learning to read.

Ellen integrated some traditional quantitative assessments and used periodic checks from standardized measures provided by basal reader publishers. For example, she had the children read from primer and pre-primer books and used commercially produced evaluation charts provided by the publishers. The actual numerical values that Ellen was required to produce were derived from a combination of Running Record scores, some occasional commercial

measures, and her own professional assessment of the child's literacy behaviors.

A great deal of evaluation information was gathered informally through Ellen's notes which were kept in a large loose leaf notebook. Daily and weekly observations describing children's literacy behaviors such as reading favorite books and story writing were an important part of Ellen's evaluation. For example, one notation recorded that a student was using beginning and ending consonants in his invented spelling, had told his classmates he could read his writing during journal time, and that he sat in the library with a friend looking at a nursery rhyme book and singing the rhymes.

As the school year progressed Ellen kept careful records on student writing and the children's growing knowledge of letter/sound relations. Total number of letter/sound relations used in writing was calculated quarterly (see Appendix D). This information combined with anecdotal notes and actual samples of children's writing produced writing scores. Anecdotal notes and writing samples provided evidence of children's growing ability to produce connected text and writing effort. Ellen commented in her interviews that monitoring the writing growth of children was aided by noting the increase in conventional letter/sound relations in their stories. She could predict an increase in reading proficiency by a growing use of letter/sound relations in writing. Ellen's observations are consistent with developmental theory about children's learning (Clay, 1979) which holds that conventional

reading occurs when children are also beginning to write using the alphabetic principle.

Assigning writing grades produced a continual dilemma for Ellen. Although she never gave very low or failing scores she did give grades on children's classroom writing after the first half of the school year. To handle this part of her work Ellen talked to the children and explained about good writing by showing examples of stories the students had written. She read these stories out loud and commented on the writing by telling the children that it was good writing because it made sense and had details about the topic.

In brief, Ellen's methods of evaluation combined many whole language techniques some traditional measures. As a necessary compromise she produced the kind of evaluation her district demanded and also managed her needs as a whole language teacher. Ellen's situation would be intolerable for some teachers. For her, it achieves an uneasy peace. Managing a dual system of evaluation requires an innovative and dedicated professional educator. It is labor intensive and value conflicted. Unfortunately, Ellen's story captures a familiar theme. Many teachers experience similar situations.

Conclusions

Even under the best of circumstances evaluation is the bane of most teacher's work. One reason for this is that the nature of pedagogy is inconsistent and complex. The work of teaching calls for simultaneous mentoring and judging. Thus, actual teacher thinking and action in the classroom does not follow expected norms (Peterson, Marx, & Clark, 1978). Exploration of Ellen's thinking and

action indicates that evaluation is an inseparable part of learning and the dynamics of this particular classroom. Evaluation in Ellen's teaching included consideration of children's psychological, academic, and social lives. It was not a separate step that followed instruction. Teaching itself is misunderstood. Recent research on teacher thinking and action (Yinger, 1986) indicates that educators do the work of design professionals. Rather than oversee students, curriculum, or quantitative measurement of learning outcomes, teachers adapt their actions as they support and assess learners in a recursive and interactive manner.

Although this discussion provides insight into one teacher's work I would argue that Ellen' experience is common. Educators such as Ellen choose whole language. Not only do they prefer it, but they are willing and able to make it work in their classrooms. Many such teachers work in schools that require traditional evaluation. And each teacher finds a way of coping. One way Ellen copes with the reality of her situation is understanding that her evaluation would be different if she were in a different institution. Her interviews and comments reveal that she knows her evaluation is shaped by the context and culture of her school. Having worked with "at-risk" urban children her entire career, Ellen makes the compromises necessary to maintain her practice with children she wants to teach. At the heart of her evaluation Ellen constructs meaning for herself and her students in ways that are child-centered and consistent with theoretical groundings. Like all good teachers she does the best she can. Importantly, she makes classroom life a learning place for herself and the children.

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APPENDIX A

PARENT'S QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Do you take your child to the library? ____yes ✓no

2. How many times a week or month does your child visit the public library? ____week ____month

3. When you and your child visit the library, what types of media does he/she take out?

   ____books ____records

   ____films ____tapes

   ____magazines ____other (explain)

4. Does your child own a library card? ____yes ✓no

5. Do you own a library card? ____yes ✓no

6. Does your child bring the books home from the library and "read" them immediately? ____yes ____no

7. Can your child read these books by himself/herself? ____yes ____no

8. How much time do you spend reading a book, magazine, cereal box, etc. to your child a day?

   ____15 minutes

   ✓1/2 hour

   ____1 hour

   ____1 1/2 hour

   ____more than 1 1/2 hour

9. Does your child read different things to you ✓yes ____no

10. Do you and your child discuss what has been read that day? ✓yes ____no

APPENDIX B

READING QUESTIONNAIRE

NAME [redacted]

DATE 8.31 90

1. Do you like to read? No Why? I like to look at it, but I don't like to read it.

2. What kinds of books do you like to read or listen to? Goldilocks

3. What do you do when you're reading and you come to something you don't know? I just read it my way. I don't need to know what it says

4. Do you think reading is important? No Why? Because I just don't think it's impt.

5. Do you go to another library besides the school library? Which one? How often? With whom? Sister Do you have a card with your name on it? No

6. Is reading hard or easy for you? Easy Why? Cause some people teach me how to read

7. What's your favorite subject in school? dogs, cat Why? I like...

8. What do you like to do in your spare time? Read books, bike ride

9. Are you a good reader? Not that much Why? I just don't know how to read

10. Are you a good writer? Not that much Why? Cause I don't know how to write the word I write it my way. Sometimes the sound.

11. What languages do you (or your parents) speak at home?

12. Is your family a reading family? They read the newspaper

13. Is there time and a place for you to read at home? In my room

Other comments: Sometimes after school.

(Primer) (end)

3-25

SILLY SAM
Part One
A Fish for Alice

Silly Sam was going to a party.
It was a party for Alice.
He put on his shoes.
He put on his hat.
He put on his coat.
And he went to the party.
Silly Sam went by a man with a fish.
"I am going to a party for Alice,"
said Silly Sam.
"Do you know what present I could put
I can give her?
She has books and hats
and balls and crayons.
She has all kinds of things
to play with.
What present can I give her?"
Does she have a fish
that can jump up and down?"
asked the

Opening Doors Macmillian 156-158

$\frac{6}{100} = 94\%$

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APPENDIX D

3rd Q

LETTER IDENTIFICATION SCORE SHEET

Date: 1991-9

Age: 6

order: LFA

Date of Birth:

	B	M	E			B	M	E	
A	✓	✓			st	✓		✓	
B	✓	✓			bl				
C	✓				sl				
D	✓	✓	✓		br				
E	✓	✓			gr	✓			
F	✓	✓	✓		tr				
G	✓		✓		str				
H	✓	✓			sk				
I					sc				
J					kl				
K	✓				cl	✓			
L	✓	✓	✓		dr	✓			
M	✓		✓		tr				
N	✓	✓	✓		skr				
O	✓	✓			scr				
P	✓		✓		sm				
Q					sp	✓			
R	✓	✓	✓		sw				
S	✓	✓	✓		fl				
T		✓	✓		pl				
U					ch	✓	✓	✓	
V		✓	✓		sh			✓	
W	✓		✓		th	✓	✓	✓	
X					wh				
Y					thr				
Z					nd				
					nk				
					ld				
	11	13	12	TOTALS		1	2	4	

Confusions:

Letters Unknown:

Comment:

Recording:

55

3/91 mom's don't

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